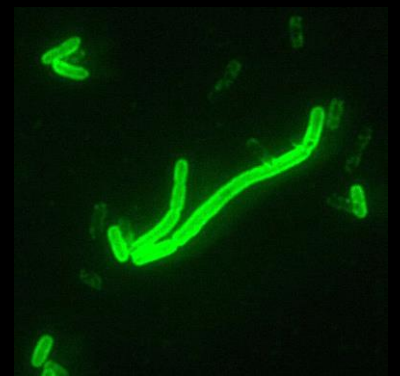
Epidemics
430 B.C. – 1353 AD

Text Wikipedia / Slideshow Anders Dernback

Yersinia pestis



The Plague of Athens, Michiel Sweerts, c. 1652–1654

The city-state of Athens in ancient Greece during the second year of the Peloponnesian War (430 BC) when an Athenian victory still seemed within reach. The plague killed an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 people and is believed to have entered Athens main city through Piraeus, the city's port and sole source of food and supplies.

Plague of Athens 430 B.C.

Much of the eastern Mediterranean also saw an outbreak of the disease, albeit with less impact. The plague had serious effects on Athens' society, resulting in a lack of adherence to laws and religious belief; in response laws became stricter, resulting in the punishment of non-citizens claiming to be Athenian. The plague returned twice more, in 429 BC and in the winter of 427/426 BC. Some 30 pathogens have been suggested as having caused the plague.

A reconstructed appearance of Myrtis, an 11-year-old girl who died during the plague of Athens and whose skeleton was found in the Kerameikos mass grave, National Archaeological Museum of Athens

The plague was an unforeseen event that resulted in one of the largest recorded loss of life in ancient Greece as well as a breakdown of Athenian society. The balance of power between citizens had changed due to many of the rich dying and their fortunes being inherited by remaining relatives of the lower class. According to Thucydides, those who had become ill and survived were the most sympathetic to others suffering, believing that they can no longer succumb to any illness a number of survivors offered to assist with the remaining sick. It had also contributed to Athens' overall loss of power and ability to expand. Many of the remaining Athenians were found to be metics who had forged their documentation or had bribed officials to hide their original status. A number of these people were reduced to slaves once they were caught. This resulted in stricter laws dictating who can become an Athenian citizen, reducing both their number of potential soldiers and amount of political power, but also a decline in treatment and rights for metics in Athens. The plague dealt massive damage to Athens two years into the Peloponnesian War, from which it never recovered. Their political strength had weakened and morale among their armies as well as the citizens had fallen significantly.

Antonine Plague of 165 to 180 AD

The Antonine Plague of 165 to 180 AD, also known as the Plague of Galen (from the name of the Greek physician living in the Roman Empire who described it), was an ancient pandemic brought to the Roman Empire by troops returning from campaigns in the Near East. Scholars have suspected it to have been either smallpox or measles, but the true cause remains undetermined. The epidemic may have claimed the life of a Roman emperor, Lucius Verus, who died in 169 C.E and was the co-regent of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, whose family name, Antoninus, has become associated with the epidemic. The disease broke out again nine years later, according to the Roman historian Dio Cassius (155–235), causing up to 2,000 deaths a day in Rome, one quarter of those who were affected, giving the disease a mortality rate of about 25%. The total deaths have been estimated at 5 million, and the disease killed as much as one-third of the population in some areas and devastated the Roman army.

The angel of death striking a door during the plague of Rome; engraving by Levasseur after Jules-Elie Delaunay

The Plague of Cyprian about AD 249 to 262
Dead: 1 million + (Unknown, but at least)

The Plague of Cyprian was a pandemic that afflicted the Roman Empire from about AD 249 to 262. The plague is thought to have caused widespread manpower shortages for food production and the Roman army, severely weakening the empire during the Crisis of the Third Century. Its modern name commemorates St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, an early Christian writer who witnessed and described the plague. The agent of the plague is highly speculative due to sparse sourcing, but suspects include smallpox, pandemic influenza and viral hemorrhagic fever (filoviruses) like the Ebola virus.

The severe devastation to the European population from the two plagues may indicate that the people had no previous exposure or immunity to the plague's cause. Historian William Hardy McNeill asserts that both the earlier Antonine Plague (166–180) and the **Plague of Cyprian (251–270) were the first transfers from animal hosts to humanity of two different diseases, one of smallpox and one of measles although not necessarily in that order. D. Ch. Stathakopoulos asserts that both outbreaks were of smallpox.**

According to historian Kyle Harper, the symptoms attributed by ancient sources to the Plague of Cyprian better match a viral disease causing a hemorrhagic fever, such as ebola, rather than smallpox. (Conversely, Harper believes that the Antonine Plague was caused by smallpox.)

The Plague of Justinian (541–542 AD, with recurrences until 750) was a pandemic that afflicted the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire and especially its capital, Constantinople, as well as the Sasanian Empire and port cities around the entire Mediterranean Sea. 25–100 million; 40–50% of population of Europe killed.

Some historians believe the plague of Justinian was one of the deadliest pandemics in history, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 25–100 million people during two centuries of recurrence, a death toll equivalent to as much as half of Europe's population at the time of the first outbreak. The plague's social and cultural impact has been compared to that of the Black Death that devastated Eurasia in the fourteenth century, but research published in 2019 argued that the plague's death toll and social effects have been exaggerated.

In 2013, researchers confirmed earlier speculation that the cause of the Plague of Justinian was Yersinia pestis, the same bacterium responsible for the Black Death (1347–1351). The latter was much shorter, but still killed an estimated one-third to one-half of Europeans. Ancient and modern Yersinia pestis strains closely related to the ancestor of the Justinian plague strain have been found in Tian Shan, a system of mountain ranges on the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and China, suggesting that the Justinian plague may have originated in or near that region.

The plague of 664 was a local plague that affected the British Isles. 10,000 +

It was the first recorded plague in English history, and coincided with a solar eclipse. It was referred to by later sources as "The Yellow Plague of 664 and said to have lasted for twenty to twenty-five years, causing widespread mortality, social disruption and abandonment of religious faith.
According to Irish sources (the annals of Tigernach), the plague was preceded by a solar eclipse on May 1, 664 (a total eclipse indeed did occur on May 1, 664 over North America in the vicinity of Long Island, and a partial eclipse possibly would have been visible from Ireland). Bede also mentioned the eclipse but wrongly placed it on May 3.

The Irish sources claimed that there was also an earthquake in Britain and that the plague reached Ireland first at Mag Nitha, among the Fothairt in Leinster. Bede claimed that the plague first was in the south of Britain and then spread to the north.
According to Adomnan of Iona, a contemporary Irish abbot and saint, the plague affected everywhere in the British Isles except for a large area in what would now be modern Scotland. Adomnan considered the plague a divine punishment for sins, and he believed that the Picts and Irish who lived in northern Great Britain were spared from the plague due to the intercession of St Columba who had founded monasteries among them. Adomnan personally walked among victims of the plague and claimed that neither he nor his companions became sick.

Columba banging on the gate of Bridei, son of Maelchon, King of Fortriu.

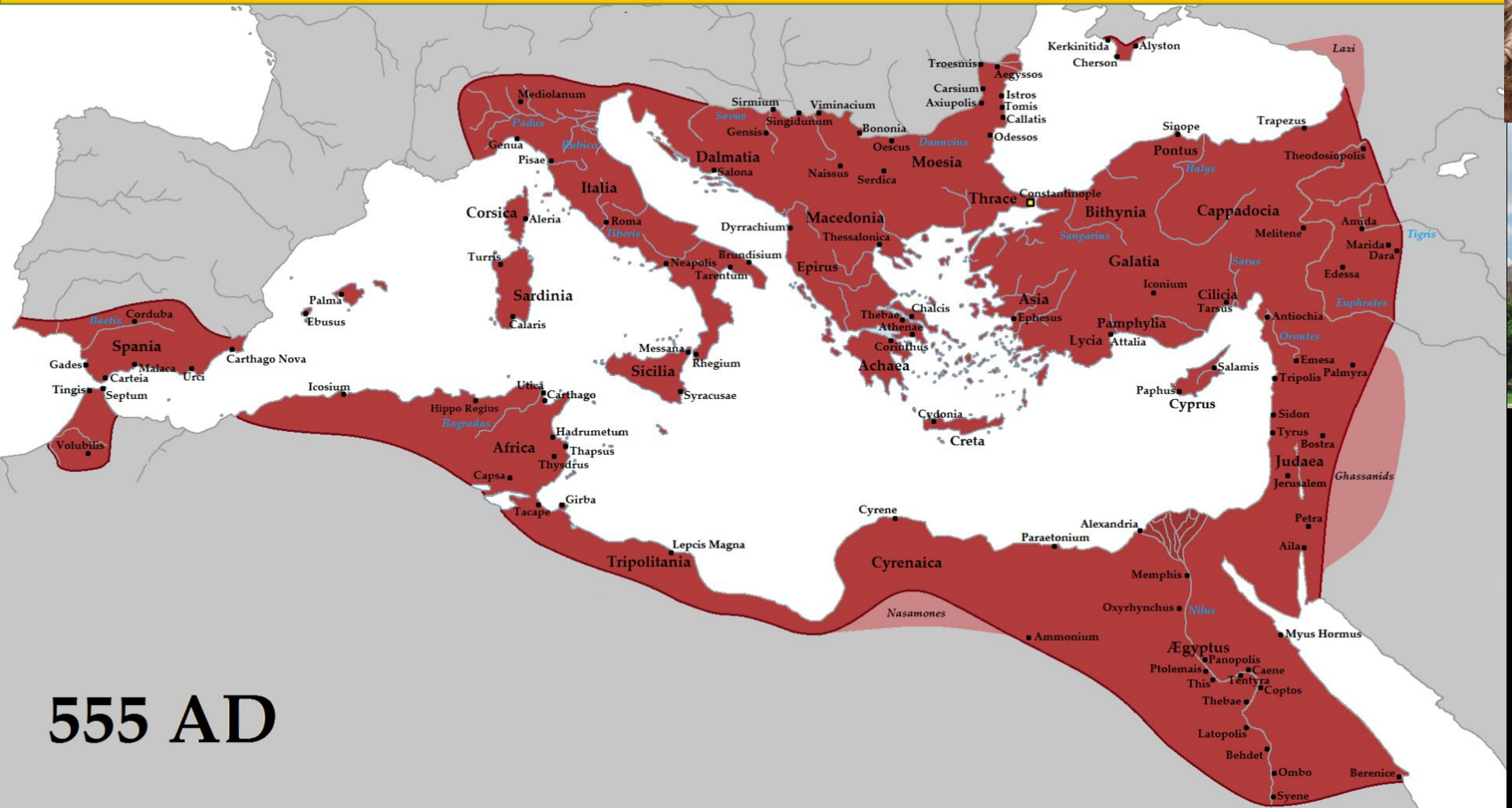
Columba Scots: Columbkille 7 December 521 – 9 June 597) was an Irish abbot and missionary evangelist credited with spreading Christianity in what is today Scotland at the start of the Hiberno-Scottish mission. He founded the important abbey on Iona, which became a dominant religious and political institution in the region for centuries. He is the patron saint of Derry. He was highly regarded by both the Gaels of Dál Riata and the Picts, and is remembered today as a Catholic saint and one of the Twelve Apostles of Ireland. In Ireland, he is commonly known as Colmcille.

735–737 Japanese smallpox epidemic
2 million dead

Epidemic of the Tenpyō era") was a major smallpox epidemic that afflicted much of Japan. Killing approximately 1/3 of the entire Japanese population, the epidemic had significant social, economic, and religious repercussions throughout the country.
Death: 2 million (Approx. 1⁄3 of entire Japanese population).

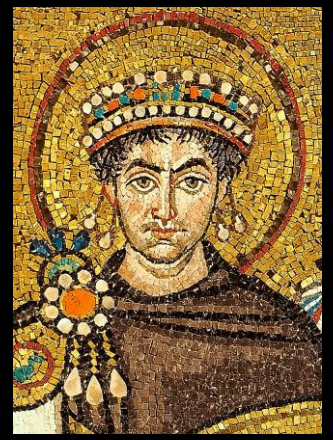
A few decades prior to the outbreak, Japanese court officials had adopted the Chinese policy of reporting disease outbreaks among the general population. This recording practice greatly facilitated the identification of smallpox as the disease that afflicted Japan during the years 735-737.
Increased contact between Japan and the Asian mainland had led to more frequent and serious outbreaks of infectious diseases. The smallpox epidemic of 735-737 was recorded as having taken hold around 735's month of August in the city of Dazaifu, Fukuoka in northern Kyushu, where the infection had ostensibly been carried by a Japanese fisherman who had contracted the illness after being stranded on the Korean peninsula. The disease spread rapidly throughout northern Kyushu that year, and persisted into the next. By 736, many land tenants in Kyushu were either dying or forsaking their crops, leading to poor agricultural yields and ultimately famine.

The empire in 555 under Justinian the Great, at its greatest extent since the fall of the Western Roman Empire (its vassals in pink)



555 AD

Plague of 746–747



The Black Death, also known as the Pestilence, the Great Bubonic Plague, the Great Plague or the Plague, or less commonly the Great Mortality or the Black Plague

Dead
75–200 million (10–60% of European population)

Was the most devastating pandemic recorded in human history, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 75 to 200 million people in Eurasia, peaking in Europe from 1347 to 1351. The bacterium Yersinia pestis, which results in several forms of plague (septicemic, pneumonic and, the most common, bubonic), is believed to have been the cause. The Black Death was the first major European outbreak of plague and the second plague pandemic. The plague created a number of religious, social and economic upheavals, with profound effects on the course of European history.

Consequences

Death toll

Citizens of Tournai bury plague victims

There are no exact figures for the death toll; the rate varied widely by locality. In urban centres, the greater the population before the outbreak, the longer the duration of the period of abnormal mortality. **It killed some 75 to 200 million people in Eurasia**. According to medieval historian Philip Daileader in 2007:

The trend of recent research is pointing to a figure more like 45–50% of the European population dying during a four-year period. There is a fair amount of geographic variation. In Mediterranean Europe, areas such as Italy, the south of France and Spain, where plague ran for about four years consecutively, it was probably closer to 75–80% of the population. In Germany and England ... it was probably closer to 20%.

Death toll

Half of Paris's population of 100,000 people died. In Italy, the population of Florence was reduced from 110,000–120,000 inhabitants in 1338 down to 50,000 in 1351. At least 60% of the population of Hamburg and Bremen perished, and a similar percentage of Londoners may have died from the disease as well. In London approximately 62,000 people died between 1346 and 1353. While contemporary reports account of mass burial pits being created in response to the large numbers of dead, recent scientific investigations of a burial pit in Central London found well-preserved individuals to be buried in isolated, evenly spaced graves, suggesting at least some pre-planning and Christian burials at this time.[98] Before 1350, there were about 170,000 settlements in Germany, and this was reduced by nearly 40,000 by 1450.

The most widely accepted estimate for the Middle East, including Iraq, Iran and Syria, during this time, is for a death toll of about a third of the population. The Black Death killed about 40% of Egypt's population.